

# MOSAICS OF THE EARLY CHURCH AT STOBI

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In 1973 archeologists of the Yugoslav-American Stobi Project discovered a fourth-century church whose floor lay some four meters beneath the monumental Episcopal Basilica that replaced it.<sup>1</sup> The difficult work of excavating this deeply buried early church still continues.<sup>2</sup> By 1984 nearly the entire floor of the nave, paved with mosaic, had been uncovered (Fig. 1).<sup>3</sup> The mosaics are an important addition to the small group of fourth-century Christian floor mosaics from the Balkans. The extensive archeological evidence about them and their relationship to other Stobi mosaics enhance their significance.

Since my interest in Stobi was inspired by Professor Kitzinger's careful survey of the site,<sup>4</sup> I would like to use this occasion to discuss the mosaics of the early church. In fact, the seminal stud-

ies of floor mosaics that he has contributed over the years are crucial to understanding these new mosaics.

When the early church was discovered, two phases of decoration were obvious. There were two layers of fresco on the walls, and two superposed floors could be seen in the edge of a robber trench from which the foundation of the chancel screen had evidently been removed.<sup>5</sup> The mosaics of the chancel and fragments of a coarse mosaic floor that extended below the nave mosaic seemed to belong to the earlier phase. The upper nave mosaic appeared to be later.<sup>6</sup>

The results of the most recent excavations have clarified the chronology of the early church and shown that our initial hypotheses were incorrect. In fact, the western sections of the nave are part of the church's original decoration (Fig. 2). The eastern part of the nave mosaic and the chancel mosaics were added when the church was enlarged (Fig. 6). The fragment of coarse mosaic floor extending below the second phase nave mosaic almost certainly belongs to the first phase presbytery. The original building was lengthened by adding a new presbytery, approximately four meters long, onto its eastern end. It departs from the common pattern, in which the altar remains in the same place and the church is enlarged by additions on the west.<sup>7</sup> The presence of other structures on

<sup>1</sup>J. Wiseman and Dj. Mano-Zissi, "Excavations at Stobi, 1973–1974," *Journal of Field Archaeology* (hereafter *JFA*), 1 (1974), 142.

<sup>2</sup>The excavations of the early church begun during the Yugoslav-American project have been continued by a Yugoslav team under the direction of Dr. Blaga Aleksova since 1980. J. Wiseman and Dj. Mano-Zissi, "Stobi: A City of Ancient Macedonia" (hereafter "Stobi, 1975–1976"), *JFA* 3 (1976), 287 f; J. Wiseman, "Stobi in Yugoslavian Macedonia: Archaeological Excavations and Research, 1977–1978," *JFA* 5 (1978), 395 ff; B. Aleksova, "Episcopal Basilica at Stobi: Excavations and Researches 1970–1981," *XVI. Internationaler Byzantinistenkongress: Akten*, II/4, *JÖB* 32/4 (1982), 488 ff; idem, "Episkopska bazilika u svetlosti novih arheoloških iskopavanja," *Gunjačin Zbornik* (Zagreb, 1980), 67 ff; idem, "Episkopskata bazilika vo Stobi vo svetlinata na novite arheološki istraživanja," *Macedoniae acta archaeologica* (hereafter *MacAA*), 6 (1984), 90 ff; idem, "The Old Episcopal Basilica at Stobi," *Archfug* 22–23 (1982–83 [1985]), 55 ff; idem, "Stobi, starata episkopska bazilika," *Makedonska akademija na naukite i umetnostite: Zbornik na trudovi posveteni na akademikot Mihailo Apostolski po povod 75-godišninata od životot* (Skopje, 1986), 357 ff; idem, "The Early Christian Basilicas at Stobi," *Corsi Rav* (1986), 27 ff.

<sup>3</sup>The most extensive discussion of the mosaics published to date is found in Aleksova, "Old Episcopal Basilica," 56 ff; idem, "Basilicas," 27 ff. For color illustrations, B. Aleksova, "Stobi," in *Umetničkoto bogatstvo na Makedonija* (Skopje, 1984), 58 f.

<sup>4</sup>E. Kitzinger, "A Survey of the Early Christian Town of Stobi," *DOP* 3 (1946), 83 ff.

<sup>5</sup>Wiseman, "Stobi, 1977–1978," 406, fig. 13.

<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*, 406 f. R. Kolarik, "The Floor Mosaics of Eastern Illyricum: The Northern Regions," *Actes du Xe Congrès International d'Archéologie Chrétienne*, I (Thessaloniki-Vatican City, 1984), 451 ff; idem, "The Floor Mosaics of Eastern Illyricum: The Northern Regions," *Rapports présentés au Xe Congrès International d'Archéologie Chrétienne, Thessalonique, 28 Septembre–4 Octobre 1980*, *Hellenika* 26 (1980), 180 ff. Hereafter only the former, a revised illustrated version of the latter article, will be cited.

<sup>7</sup>As in the slightly later Damokratia Basilica at Demetrias in Thessaly, for example. P. Asimakopoulou-Atzaka, "Early Christian and Byzantine Magnesia," *Magnesia: The Story of a Civilization* (Athens, 1982), 145 ff, fig. 50.

the east may have affected the planning of the early church.<sup>8</sup>

In its first phase the church was decorated with fresco imitating opus sectile<sup>9</sup> and an unconventional mosaic floor (Fig. 2). The mosaicists chose some complex and ambitious ornamental patterns but laid them unevenly. They executed the filling motifs in a crude, even primitive, manner. The juxtaposition of geometric fields of various sizes suggests "kilims" strewn over the floor of a Balkan living room. The rectangular fields are separated only by uneven dark bands.

The group of nine fields arranged in three rows of three in the west half of the nave form the most regular part of the floor (Fig. 3). In the center of the west side, presumably just inside the main entrance to the nave, is a field of tangent squares and octagons (R344).<sup>10</sup> Each octagon has an irregular inner frame and a row of dots enclosing a circle with an inscribed square. Triangles on either side of the circle create a diamond shape. The large Greek letters, Ι Χ Θ Υ Σ, inscribed into the geometric pattern, form the common acrostic for the name of Christ followed by a cross (Fig. 4).<sup>11</sup> The symmetrical panels on either side of the first field contain a diagonal grid pattern (R311). The diamonds are decorated alternately with yellow quatrefoils or motifs comprising a larger circle surrounded by four smaller ones.

A prominent inscription in a square frame inscribed into a circle decorated with radiating triangles marks the center of the next register. It reads, Εὐχαὶ καὶ ἐλε/ημοσύνη καὶ/ νηστία καὶ με/τάνοια ἐκ κα/θαρᾶς καρδίας/ ἐκ θανάτου ῥύετε. A series of tangent, elongated hexagons decorated with rudimentary "silver plate" designs covers either end of the rectangular field. The empty spaces between the circular frame of the inscription and the rest of the decoration are filled in with

crudely rendered circles of various sizes. Geometric fields with patterns of tangent octagons, squares, and elongated hexagons flank the inscription panel. The irregular filling motifs are based on circular forms: quatrefoils in the squares, curvilinear diamonds in the octagons, circles and arcs of various sizes elsewhere in the pattern.

The field in the center of the next register has a pattern of adjacent intersecting octagons that form squares and elongated hexagons (R350). Filling motifs include knots of Solomon, variations of "silver plate" patterns, combinations of curvilinear and circular designs, and birds. The fields flanking it are decorated with intersecting circles forming quatrefoils (R437). Squares set diagonally are placed in the center of each circle. Although the same pattern is used in the two fields, they differ in details of color and decoration.

Farther east a series of panels of various sizes are juxtaposed. A large field has a pattern of oblong octagons with squares (R346). They contain the same irregular curvilinear filling motifs seen in the fields to the west. Near the east end of the field a seam marks the point where the pattern abruptly changes to more regular octagons and tangent squares (R344). These three octagons are decorated with silver plate designs. A smaller field of tangent octagons and squares (R344) borders this field on the south.

A series of smaller, irregularly sized fields with a variety of motifs occupies the rest of the floor. There is no discernable logic to their placement. Four fields have variations of a cofferlike pattern composed of tangent circles and curvilinear octagons (R330) varying in scale. The filling motifs are simple, quatrefoils and concave squares. Two other fields have common patterns, bichrome scales (R511) and intersecting circles forming quatrefoils (R437).

A strip along the eastern end of the original nave has patterns of intersecting octagons forming squares and elongated hexagons (R350) at either end. In the northeast corner the hexagons contain chevron patterns; the squares are filled with quatrefoils. The same pattern occurs in the southeast corner where quatrefoils and variously shaped leaves are used as fillers. In the center of the eastern strip the patterns abruptly change to tangent squares and octagons (R344) filled with birds, leaves, and knots of Solomon. Parts, if not all, of this pattern are secondary, laid together with the second phase mosaic over the spot where the central entrance of the original chancel screen was

<sup>8</sup>The massive Roman theater and Building B, a structure of uncertain function constructed in the 4th century, were located just east of the early church. The east wall of the elongated early church cut through a plaster floor associated with Building B. Wiseman and Mano-Zissi, "Stobi, 1975–1976," 284 ff; Wiseman, "Stobi, 1977–1978," 398.

<sup>9</sup>Wiseman and Mano-Zissi, "Stobi, 1973–1974," 142 f, fig. 29; J. Wiseman and Dj. Georgievski, "Wall Decoration at Stobi," in *Studies in the Antiquities of Stobi*, II (Belgrade, 1975), 176 ff. Wiseman and Mano-Zissi, "Stobi, 1975–1976," 287; Wiseman, "Stobi, 1977–1978," 398 ff, figs. 8 and 9.

<sup>10</sup>Numbers with an R prefix refer to patterns in the "Répertoire graphique du décor géométrique dans la mosaïque antique," *Bulletin de l'Association Internationale pour l'Etude de la Mosaïque Antique* (hereafter *BulAEIMA*), 4 (Paris, 1973).

<sup>11</sup>The last letter of the acrostic and the cross are beneath the line of the trench scarp and cannot be seen in Fig. 4.

located.<sup>12</sup> Just in front of that entrance was a figural panel with a vine-filled crater in the center and birds in the corners (Fig. 5).

The borders are as irregular and capricious as the rest of the mosaic. They were clearly not planned as a whole but were laid out with the corresponding fields of the nave. Their patterns often change with the change of field in the center. Included are an ivy rinceau, a grapevine, zigzags, series of triangles, a row of small circles, circular interlace, concave squares with tangent semicircles, a series of circles with six-pointed stars, variations of quatrefoils formed by intersecting circles, and scales. The first phase mosaics with their irregularly drawn concave-convex linear motifs and "silver plate" patterns convey the impression of a rich but irregular surface. The mosaicists emulated complex patterns without following the geometric principles generally used to lay them out.

The irregular layout of the floor is matched by its rudimentary technique. Only three main colors of tesserae are used: white marble, dark green sandstone, and dark yellow tuff. A few maroon tesserae are mixed into the green areas. They are irregularly cut, measuring from 1.0 to 2.5 cm. At some points along the stylobate the surround is laid with large marble chips.

The early church dates after 360, probably before the end of the fourth century. Excavations beneath the floor of its south aisle have yielded at least one coin that can be dated to the 360s–370s.<sup>13</sup> Further analysis of the pottery and other artifacts, as well as future excavation, may eventually narrow the range of possible dates.

When the early church was enlarged and redecorated, the builders took down the wall that had formed the east end of the south aisle and constructed another about four meters farther east.<sup>14</sup> The walls were repainted with designs of fake opus sectile similar to the original decoration.<sup>15</sup> The nave mosaics were repaired where the exten-

sion of the chancel screen had been.<sup>16</sup> Additional mosaics were laid in the east end of the enlarged nave (Figs. 6 and 7), covering the coarse mosaic that probably paved the original east end of the church. Four panels of geometric mosaic were laid around a cross-shaped floor of opus sectile in the new presbytery (Fig. 8). The opus sectile does not survive but has been reconstructed from impressions in the mortar.

The mosaics added in the second phase of the early church differ markedly from those of the first phase. They have more conventional patterns and are technically superior. Just in front of the entrance to the new presbytery, in the middle of the addition to the nave, an inscription panel continues the central focus established by the inscriptions and figural panel of the original mosaic. The donor inscription praises Bishop Eustathius for renewing the church: Ἀνεναίωθη/ ἡ ἀγία τοῦ Θεοῦ/ ἐκκλησία ἐπὶ/σκόπου ὄντος/ τοῦ ἀγιωτάτου/ Εὐσταθίου. Beneath the inscription is a figural design similar to that from the original mosaic, a crater containing a grapevine. Two small palm trees frame the base of the vessel.

Similar fields of geometric decoration, with the pattern of an octagon flanked by squares with diamonds in the corners (R583) repeated, flank the inscription panel (Fig. 7). A square inscribed with a circle containing an interlace knot is inserted into each octagon. The filling motifs are conventional geometric or geometricized floral patterns. They include solids in perspective, knots of Solomon, heart-shaped leaves, combinations of *peltae* and spindle shapes, and spindle shapes flanked by leaves. Two smaller panels of ornament adjoin these fields on the east: stars of eight diamonds with larger perpendicular squares and smaller diagonal squares (R367) on the north; a field of quatrefoils formed by intersecting circles (R437) with concave squares in the center of each circle on the south. Both fields are framed with waves (R190). On the north is a border of acanthus rinceau (R302), on the south an ivy rinceau (R301), which would have bordered the base of the chancel screen.

The fields of mosaic decoration in the corners of the new presbytery, most of which was paved with opus sectile, are symmetrical (Fig. 8). The two fields on the west have patterns based on rows of tangent circles forming curvilinear squares. Alternate rows are intersected with circles of the same

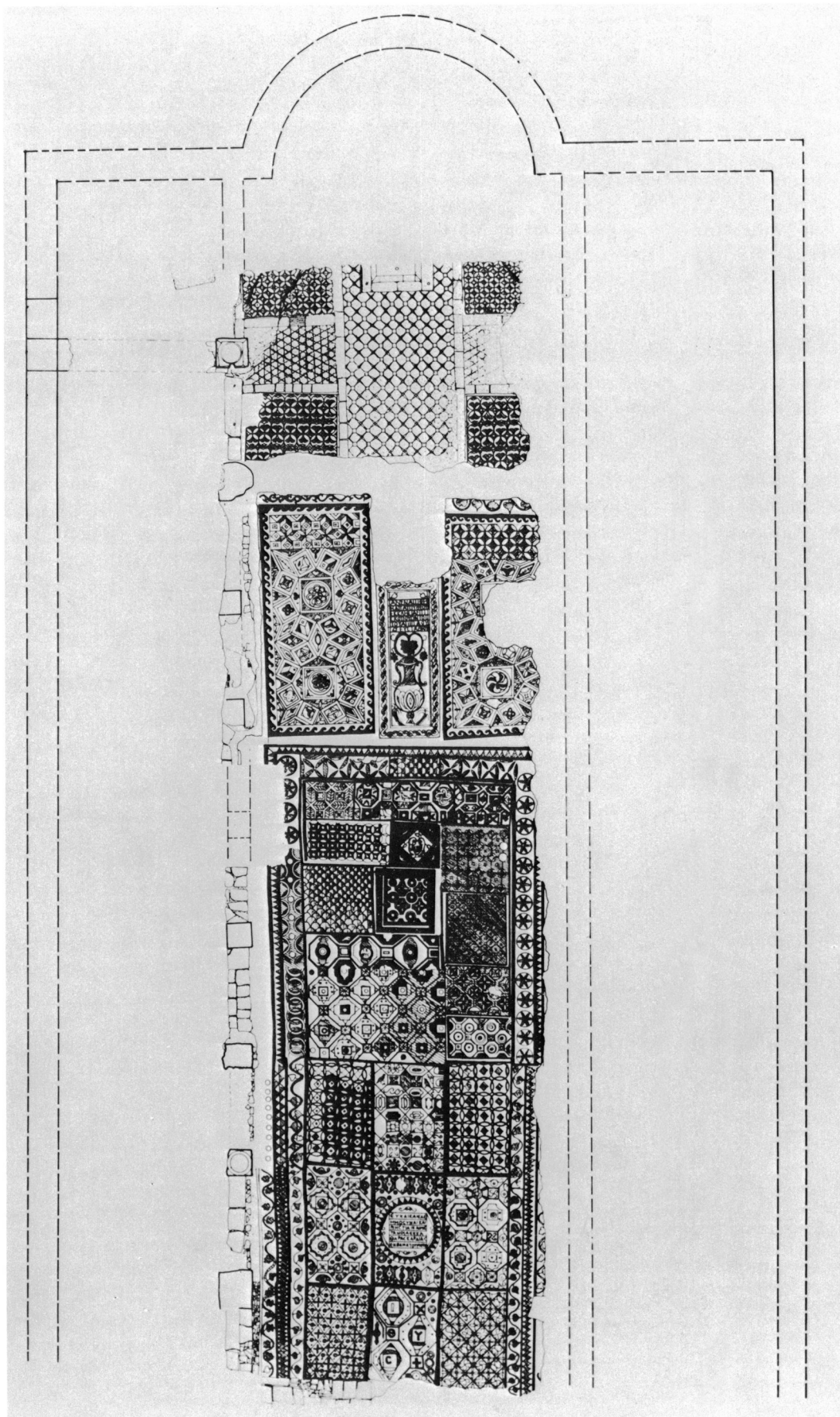
<sup>12</sup> Aleksova, "Old Episcopal Basilica," 60, fig. 1. I have not examined this section of the mosaic.

<sup>13</sup> Trench 78–14, a small test located in the south aisle within the outlines of the first phase of the early church. The coin, 78–632, dates to the 360s–370s and was deposited shortly after it was minted. This coin clearly renders impossible the Constantinian date suggested for the first phase of the building by Aleksova, "Old Episcopal Basilica," 56 f; idem, "Basilicas," 29 f.

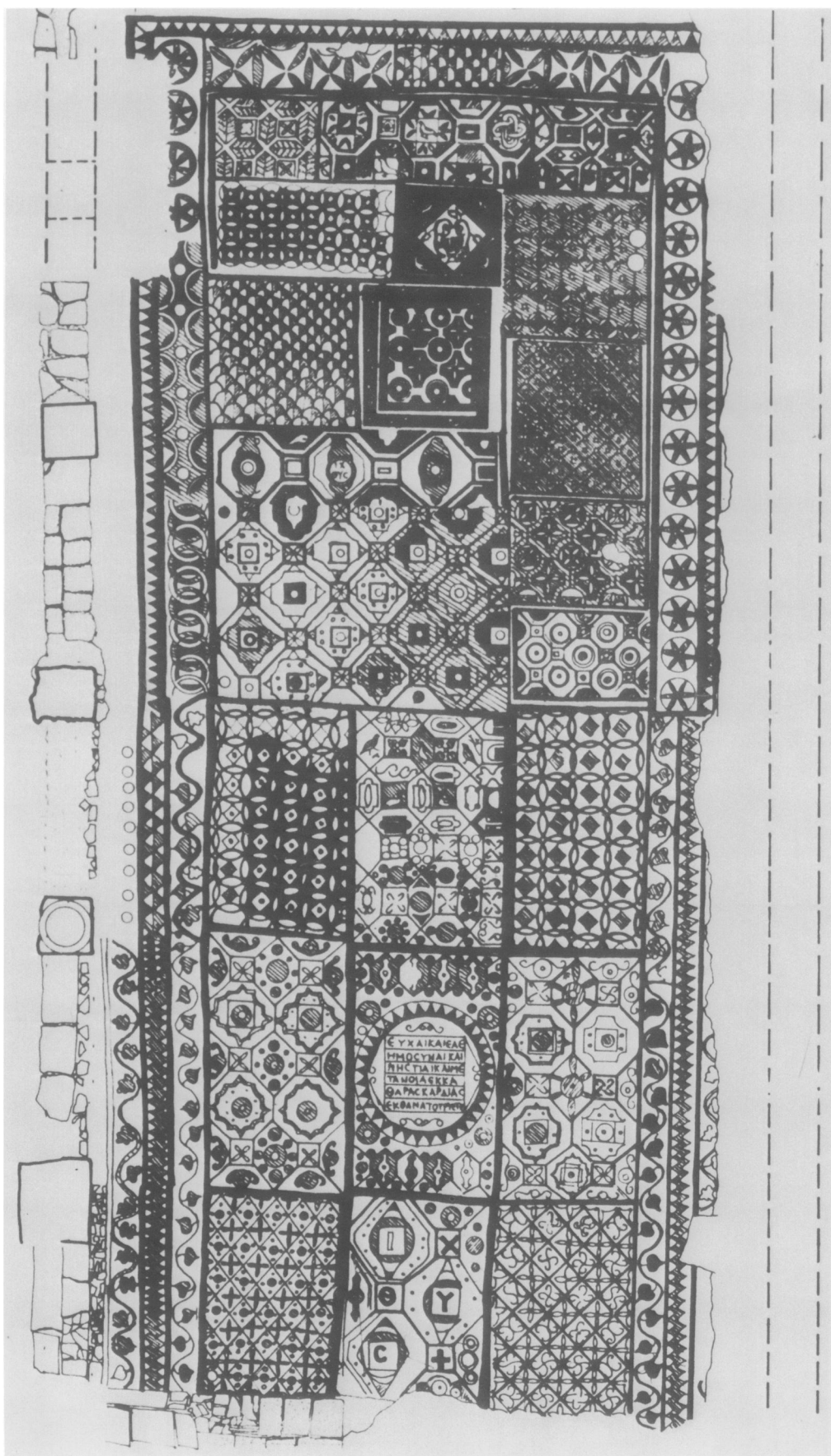
<sup>14</sup> This wall, Wall 91, was built together with the south exterior wall of the original building.

<sup>15</sup> Parts of the elaborate geometrical ceiling in place when the building was destroyed have also been recovered. For the second phase wall painting, see note 9 above and Wiseman, "Stobi, 1977–1978," 398ff, fig. 8.

<sup>16</sup> Note 12 above.



1. Plan of the early church below the Episcopal Basilica at Stobi (after Aleksova, "Basilicas")

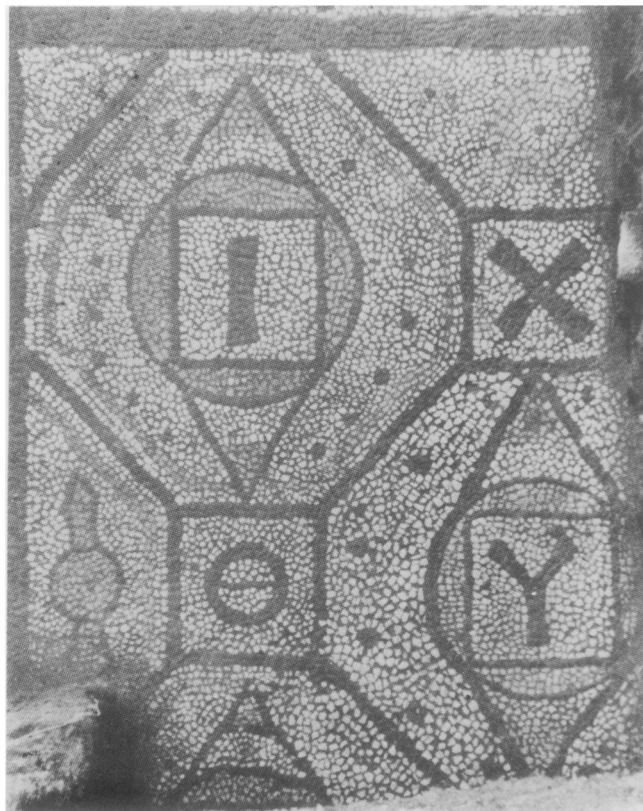


2. Detail of Figure 1 showing the first phase mosaics in the nave of the early church





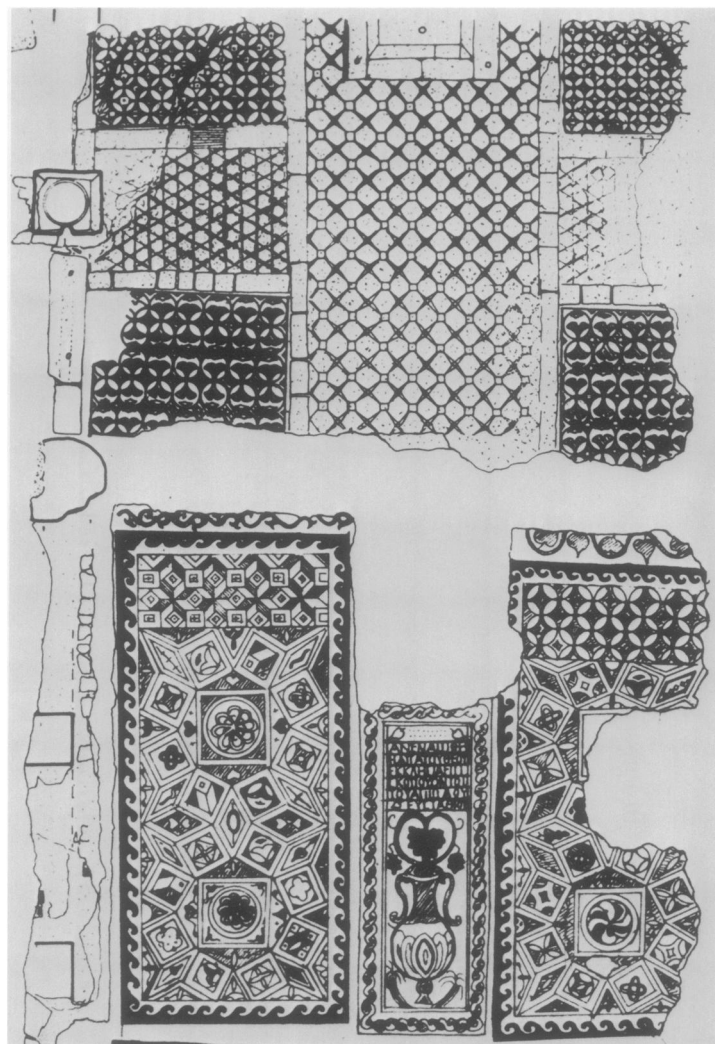
3. First phase mosaics of the early church from the west (after Aleksova, "Old Episcopal Basilica," fig. 2)



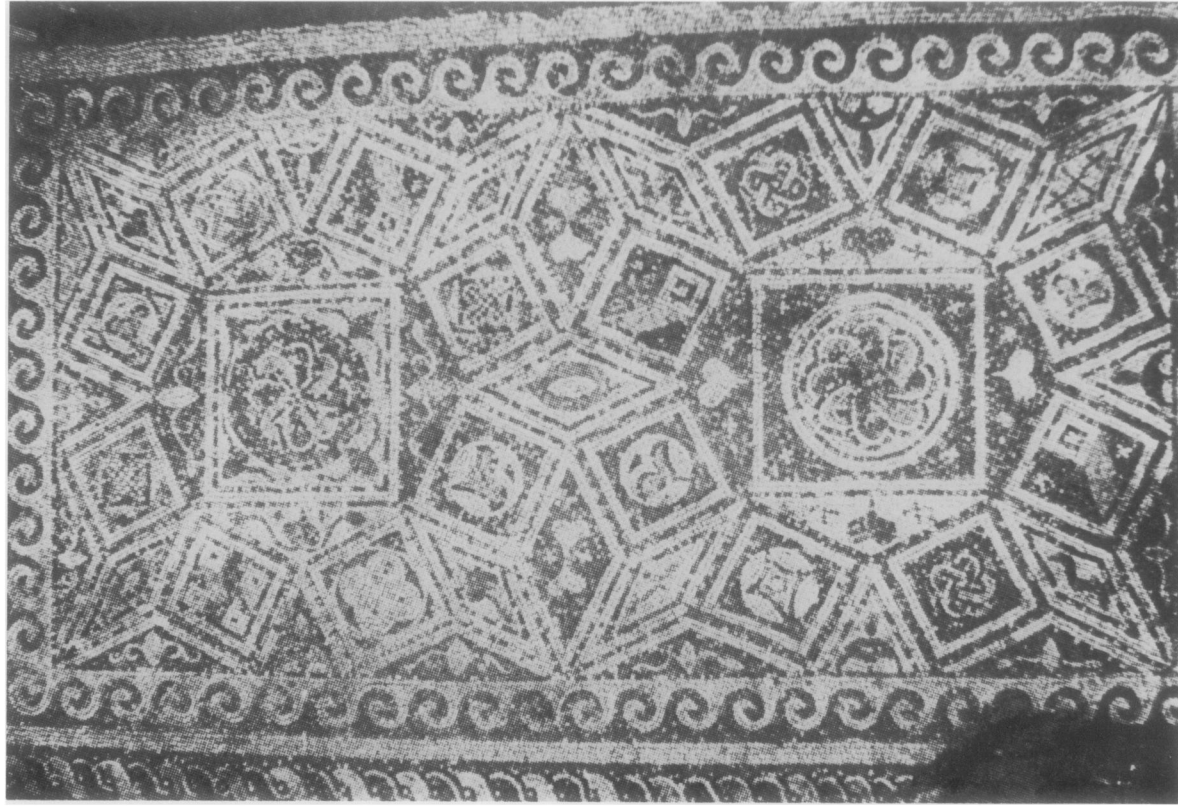
4. Detail of the Ichthys inscription from the west end of the nave of the early church (after Aleksova, "Old Episcopal Basilica," fig. 1)



5. Detail of the figural panel in front of the first phase entrance to the presbytery in the nave of the early church (after Aleksova, "Old Episcopal Basilica," fig. 3)



6. Detail of Figure 1 showing the second phase mosaics added when the early church was enlarged



7. Detail of second phase mosaic from the early church (after Aleksova, "Old Episcopal Basilica," fig. 9)



8. Detail of second phase mosaics from the early church. The mosaics of the presbytery are seen below. Above is the edge of the nave mosaic as it was revealed in 1979. A robber trench dug when the chancel screen foundations were removed divides them.



dimension to form quatrefoils. The interior of each circle contains a heart; its upper part a tangent *pelta* whose center is elaborated into a small crosslet. The concave squares in the centers of the quatrefoils contain smaller squares with dentilated outlines. A repair is noticeable in the northwest corner of the presbytery. The fields on the east have quatrefoils formed by intersecting circles (R437) with concave squares in the center of each circle.

In general the second phase mosaics are more regularly designed and neatly laid than the earlier mosaic in the west part of the nave. More colors are used, and the tesserae of each color are more precisely cut and matched. Although the second phase mosaics of the nave and those of the presbytery are both well made, they differ somewhat in technique. The nave mosaics are made from white coarse-grained marble, green sandstone, beige limestone, maroon limestone, and red orange terra-cotta. The tesserae measure from 1.5 to 2 cm. The mosaics of the presbytery use smaller tesserae, measuring 0.8 to 1.2 cm, and include some colors not seen elsewhere in the floors of the church. They use white marble, pink brecciated marble, maroon limestone, black serpentine, and dark green sandstone tesserae.

There is no direct evidence for the date of the second phase mosaics. They must date before the early church was destroyed to make way for the Episcopal Basilica. The construction of the Episcopal Basilica dates sometime after 425–450, the period of the latest coins sealed beneath its floor.<sup>17</sup> The second phase of the early church probably falls into the first half of the fifth century.

The mosaics recently discovered in the early church at Stobi confirm the pattern of development of fourth- and fifth-century mosaics that was first articulated by Professor Kitzinger.<sup>18</sup> Both of these mosaics are predominantly geometric, examples of “a geometric carpet style which became widespread in the Roman Empire during the fourth century. . . .”<sup>19</sup> In fact, the clearly established sequence of floor mosaics in the two phases of the early church and the first phase of the monumental Episcopal Basilica built over it illustrates

stages in the evolution of this taste for the geometric, at least for one site. This development can be fleshed out through comparisons with other Stobi mosaics.

The haphazard organization and coarse workmanship of the mosaics from the first phase of the early church also characterize mosaics from synagogue two at Stobi.<sup>20</sup> The two floors share some of the same common motifs, such as quatrefoils of intersecting circles and wolf's tooth borders. The unusual border design of repeated crudely drawn six-pointed rosettes is used in both floors. Some parts of the synagogue floor are made of the same rough chip mosaic laid along the north border of the early church and probably in its sanctuary.

In general, however, the synagogue mosaics are even cruder than those of the early church. While some of the same simple patterns are used in both, others that occur only in the church floor are far more intricate and complex. The mosaic in the church might therefore be somewhat later than the synagogue mosaic, which can be dated only generally to the second half of the fourth century by contextual evidence.<sup>21</sup> Although the quality—particularly of the synagogue mosaic—is limited, and the motifs they have in common are rudimentary, some of the same, most likely local, craftsmen must have laid the two floors. The more elaborate designs introduced in the church floor must be the result of new influences or models.

Parallels between the mosaics of the early church and synagogue two occur not only in their original floors, but also extend to later remodelings. The fine, precisely laid mosaics added to the west end of the main room of the synagogue can be compared to those laid in the presbytery of the newly enlarged church.<sup>22</sup> Two of the patterns used in the fine mosaics of the synagogue are, like those of the church, based on *peltae*. They also compare closely in workmanship and materials and cannot be far removed in date.<sup>23</sup> It seems certain that at Stobi

<sup>20</sup>R. Kolarik and M. Petrovski, “Technical Observations on Mosaics at Stobi,” in *Studies in the Antiquities of Stobi*, II, 66 ff, figs. 1–4; Kolarik, “Mosaics of Eastern Illyricum” (1984), 451 ff, figs. 8 and 9.

<sup>21</sup>The latest coin actually sealed beneath the synagogue mosaics, 70–211, is an issue of Licinius, dating 307–324. Coin 71–173, from below an earthen floor in the southwest room of synagogue two, dates 355–361. The construction of the Central Basilica over the destroyed synagogue has a terminus post quem of 457–474 provided by coin 71–165, an issue of Leo.

<sup>22</sup>Note 20 above.

<sup>23</sup>The addition of fine mosaics at the west end of the synagogue took place sometime between the installation of the coarse mosaics and the destruction of the synagogue. See note 21 above.

<sup>17</sup>Coins 74–428 and 75–104, cross-in-wreath type issued by Valentinian III and Theodosius II, establish only a terminus post quem. How much later than 425–450 the construction should be dated remains an open question.

<sup>18</sup>E. Kitzinger, “Stylistic Developments in Pavement Mosaics in the Greek East from the Age of Constantine to the Age of Justinian,” *La mosaïque gréco-romaine* (Paris, 1965), 341 ff.

<sup>19</sup>Kitzinger, “Stobi,” 125.

Christians and Jews hired the same craftsmen over an extended period of time and followed a similar contemporary aesthetic.<sup>24</sup>

The floors of the second phase of the early church and synagogue two can also be compared to mosaics from secular buildings at Stobi. The fine mosaics of the synagogue are virtually identical to mosaics laid in the "Casino,"<sup>25</sup> while the second phase mosaics from the lengthened nave of the early church compare closely to the mosaics of the House of Parthenius<sup>26</sup> in motif and workmanship. Both have patterns of a central octagon surrounded by squares and diamonds (R583), in which the central octagon contains a square and tangent triangles. In both cases the border designs include waves, simple guilloche, and geometrical ivy rinceau. Even the vocabulary of filling motifs is virtually identical in the two mosaics: knots of Solomon, interlaced knots, a variety of heart-shaped leaves, quatrefoils, curving lines, spindle shapes combined with *peltae* or "tendrils" on either side. They also compare closely in technique. The mosaics from the House of Parthenius have no direct archeological evidence for dating,<sup>27</sup> but they cannot be far removed from the additions made to the early church. The introduction of superior mosaics in the two cult buildings as well as residential architecture must reflect generally improved economic circumstances at Stobi. Significantly, the taste for the geometric is the same whether the buildings are sacred or secular.

The mosaics of the first phase of the Episcopal Basilica continue the taste for the geometric into the second half of the fifth century.<sup>28</sup> They represent a more mature phase characterized by elegant patterns and restrained color. They are predominantly black and white and feature rich combinations of geometric motifs without figural decoration of any kind. At Stobi geometric floor mosaics were in favor from the last quarter of the fourth

century to at least the mid-fifth century. The geometric style was widespread in the floor mosaics of the eastern Mediterranean, but seems to have been particularly dominant and long-lived in the Balkans.<sup>29</sup>

These geometric mosaics contrast sharply with the exuberant figural decoration typical earlier in the fourth century in both Christian and secular contexts. To the figural mosaics from the fourth-century church beneath St. Sophia in Sofia<sup>30</sup> and the church at Orsera<sup>31</sup> can now be added the mosaics of the single-aisled church excavated beneath the Octagon at Philippi.<sup>32</sup> New study of the residences at Stobi indicates that the figural mosaics of the House of Peristeria at Stobi most probably date sometime in the first half of the fourth century.<sup>33</sup> The presence of some figures in the mosaics of both phases of the early church at Stobi suggests, however, that the rejection of figures was neither abrupt nor complete.

The haphazard organization and relatively

<sup>29</sup> The geometric style was shorter lived in Syria, for example. J. Balty, "Les mosaïques de Syrie au Ve siècle et leur répertoire," *Byz 84* (1984), 443 ff.

<sup>30</sup> The earlier mosaics beneath St. Sophia predate the early 5th-century floor laid over them, but it is difficult to say by how much, or even if they are all contemporary. Filow's initial interpretation was revised by Pokrovsky. B. Filow, *Материали на историята на София, софийската църква Св. София* (Sofia, 1913). S. Pokrovsky, "Une mosaïque nouvellement découverte dans la basilique Sainte Sophie à Sofia, SK 5 (1932), 243 ff. Color photographs of the apse mosaic are published in D. Ovcharov and M. Vaklinova, *Ранновизантийски паметници от България IV–VII век* (Sofia, 1978), figs. 12–16. For a summary of the situation, see R. Hoddinott, *Bulgaria in Antiquity* (New York, 1975), 269 ff. The mosaics have recently been dated to the third quarter of the 4th century: V. Popova-Moroz, "Roman and Early Christian Mosaics in Bulgaria," paper delivered at the IV. Internationales Mosaikkolloquium, Trier, 8–15 August 1984.

<sup>31</sup> M. Mirabella-Roberti, "La sede paleocristiana di Orsera," *Annali triestini* 15 (Trieste, 1944), 31 ff. Mirabella-Roberti compares them to the mosaics of Aquileia and dates them ca. mid-4th century.

<sup>32</sup> The dating of these mosaics is discussed extensively by Asimakopoulou-Atzaka, who provides earlier bibliography. P. Asimakopoulou-Atzaka, "I mosaici pavimentali paleocristiani in Grecia," *Corsi Rav* 31 (1984), 16 ff. The mosaic was laid, according to the inscription, when Porphyrios was bishop. Since a Porphyrios from Philippi attended the Council of Sardis in 342–343, the mosaic has been dated to the mid-4th century. Without the evidence of the inscription, however, the mosaic had been assigned to the 5th century. J. P. Sodini, "Mosaïques paléochrétiennes de Grèce," *BCH* 94 (1970), 736; M. Spiro, *Critical Corpus of the Mosaic Pavements on the Greek Mainland, Fourth–Sixth Centuries* (New York, 1978), 629 ff. Sodini has accepted the 4th-century date. J. P. Sodini, "Review of Spiro," *BulAEIMA* 8, 1 (1980), 168 f.

<sup>33</sup> Based on a new study of the architecture. Hemans, 182 f. I had dated it to the early 5th century based upon then current understanding of the architecture. Kolarik, "Northern Illyricum" (1984), 455 ff, figs. 16 and 17.

<sup>24</sup> Similarities between floor mosaics made for Christians and Jews are seen elsewhere as well. E. Kitzinger, *Israeli Mosaics of the Byzantine Period* (New York, 1965), 13.

<sup>25</sup> Kolarik and Petrovski, "Technical Observations," 75; Kolarik, "Mosaics of Northern Illyricum" (1984), 453, fig. 10. The architecture of the "Casino" has recently been restudied by F. Hemans, *Late Antique Residences at Stobi, Yugoslavia*, Diss. (Boston University, 1986), 156 ff.

<sup>26</sup> B. Nestorović, "Iskopavanja u Stobima," *Starinar*, 3rd ser., 6 (1931), 113, fig. 4; Kitzinger, "Stobi," 124 ff, fig. 172.

<sup>27</sup> The House of Parthenius is probably contemporary or slightly later than the remodeling of the adjacent "Theodosian" Palace. The remodeling has a terminus post quem of 425–450 provided by a coin of Theodosius II. Hemans, 147 ff.

<sup>28</sup> Kolarik and Petrovski, 76 ff, figs. 9–12. These mosaics have a terminus post quem of 425–450. Note 17 above.

crude technique of the first phase floor of the early church and the floor of synagogue two from Stobi can be compared to some others in the region. Since the very characteristics that distinguish these mosaics are probably to be explained by local workmanship, a direct connection seems unlikely, however. A residence or bath excavated recently at Heraclea Lyncestis has floors that can be compared to the Stobi synagogue.<sup>34</sup> They combine coarse chip mosaic with panels of somewhat finer mosaic with inscribed diamonds and a few figures. Fragmentary mosaics found in salvage excavations on Athens Street in Thessaloniki resemble the mosaics of the early church.<sup>35</sup> Both have fields of crudely executed geometric patterns separated by dark bands. Other fourth-century mosaics in which fields with figures or simple geometric patterns are laid out in irregular "kilims" have been unearthed at Ulpiana.<sup>36</sup> Whether this rather haphazard manner of laying out a floor could be defined as a "period style" or simply results from a failure to follow the conventional manner of laying out a floor is uncertain. Clearly the mosaicists did not plan the floors as unified entities with fields of uniform size and alignment, but executed one pattern at a time, although each mosaic is consistent in technique and style and was evidently laid at roughly the same time.<sup>37</sup> There is no other explanation, such as the presence of graves in cemetery churches, for their irregular layouts.

Individual motifs in the crude mosaics of the early church appear to be drawn freehand, but in other instances they were laid out geometrically. The nave mosaics from the earliest church beneath St. Sophia in Sofia are similar in this respect.<sup>38</sup> The Stobi mosaic stands apart from other fourth-century mosaics of similarly haphazard organiza-

tion and crude execution, however, in its extensive use of intricate curvilinear patterns.<sup>39</sup>

In contrast, the mosaics of the second phase of the early church and the associated Stobi mosaics are perfectly conventional and typical of their period. Comparable mosaics with small neatly executed geometric patterns featuring a remarkably consistent repertoire of motifs are found all over the eastern Mediterranean. Only the combination of *peltae* and quatrefoils seen in the presbytery is rarely seen farther east.<sup>40</sup> The pattern of an octagon with tangent squares in the nave, on the other hand, is extremely common in the entire empire during the fourth and fifth centuries with many examples.<sup>41</sup> Three especially comparable groups of mosaics are those from the early fifth-century church beneath St. Sophia in Sofia,<sup>42</sup> the Damokratia Basilica in Demetrias, Thessaly,<sup>43</sup> and Basilica A at Dion in Greek Macedonia.<sup>44</sup> These mosaics usually have no figural decoration except for the vessel with vines.

How meaningful was the selection and placement of this single figural motif just in front of the entrance to the presbytery in both phases of the early church at Stobi? The motif of the vessel with vines is, of course, derived from pagan sources and was commonplace in Roman art. No powerful symbolism can automatically be attached to it, although its location often suggests that it is an apotropaic device.<sup>45</sup> In Christian art, too, it appears so often in decorative contexts that it seems utterly innocuous. In other instances, however, a clear and explicit Christian meaning is attached to it.

<sup>39</sup> A discussion of the sources for this style is beyond the scope of this note. Similar patterns occur in the mosaic of the House of Peristeria at Stobi. Note 33 above.

<sup>40</sup> H. Stern, "Sur un motif ornemental des mosaïques du palais dit de Theodoric à Ravenne," *FR*, 4th ser., 116, 2 (1978), 57 ff. The motif analyzed by Stern, a *pelta* quatrefoil, is closely related, but not identical, to the pattern of the presbytery mosaics in which parallel rows of *peltae*, not groups of four, are used. Both motifs occur at Stobi and elsewhere in the Balkans.

<sup>41</sup> R374. Salies terms it Oktogonsystem VI and lists many examples. G. Salies, "Untersuchungen zu den geometrischen Gliederungsschemata römischer Mosaiken," *BjB* 174 (1974), 147 ff. It is seen at both Demetrias, Spiro, figs. 437–39; Asimakopoulou-Atzaka, "Magnesia," fig. 55; and Dion, Spiro, fig. 602; Asimakopoulou-Atzaka, "Mosaici in Grecia," 20 ff, pl. 2c. For the motif in Syria, Balty, 441, pls. 4, 5; D. Levi, *Antioch Mosaic Pavements* (Princeton, 1947), 467 ff and s.v. star of octagon.

<sup>42</sup> Coins of Arcadius were found sealed beneath these mosaics, providing a terminus post quem of 395–408. Filow, 49. For other bibliography see note 30 above.

<sup>43</sup> Spiro, 380 ff; Asimakopoulou-Atzaka, "Magnesia," 145 ff.

<sup>44</sup> Spiro, 521 ff; Asimakopoulou-Atzaka, "Mosaici in Grecia," 202 ff, with earlier bibliography.

<sup>45</sup> A. Merlin and L. Poinssot, "Deux mosaïques de Tunisie à sujets prophylactiques," *Mon Piot* 34 (1934), 138 ff.

<sup>34</sup> The excavator dates these mosaics to the late 3rd or early 4th century. P. Srbinovski, "Rezultati od iskopivanja vo 1976 godina," *MacAA* 5 (1979), 99 ff. Another such floor has been found in salvage excavations in Veroia in northern Greece. Spiro, 557 ff, figs. 623–27, with earlier bibliography.

<sup>35</sup> M. Michaelidis, *Agx. Δελτ.* 25 B2 (1970), 18, pl. 18.

<sup>36</sup> G. Tomašević, "Ulpiana: Arheološka iskopavanja u središtu i južnom delu antičkog grada," *Saopštenja* 15 (1983), 77 ff, figs. 16–17, 20–23. Such mosaics are also found in the Olous Basilica on Crete. S. Pelekanides with P. Atzaka, *Σύνταγμα τῶν παλαιοχριστιανικῶν ψηφιδωτῶν δαπέδων τῆς Ἑλλάδος I*, Νησιωτικὴ Ἑλλάς (Thessaloniki, 1974), no. 96, 115 f, pls. 86–89. There is no independent evidence for the date of this mosaic. A purely ornamental mosaic of this type is found at Kenchreai, exonarthex of the basilica. L. Ibrahim, "Appendix A: The Floor Mosaics," *Kenchreai, Eastern Port of Corinth, Topography and Architecture*, I (Leiden, 1978), 110 ff, figs. xLI, A–D.

<sup>37</sup> The *rudus* of each field, as well as the tesserae themselves, was laid out separately. Kolarik and Petrovski, 69 and fig. 3.

<sup>38</sup> Note 30 above.

The motif appears flanked by lambs on a church floor in the Chrysopolitissa Basilica at Kato Paphos on Cyprus where it is inscribed with the words of John 15:1, "I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser."<sup>46</sup>

Clearly one cannot automatically assume that the motif is always charged with sacred and symbolic meaning, nor can one dismiss it as merely decorative. The linguistic concept of a "semantic range" applied to such situations by Professor Kitzinger provides the key to understanding.<sup>47</sup> The motif must be analyzed in its context, not considered in isolation.

On the Stobi floor, as in many other Christian contexts,<sup>48</sup> the placement of this motif is obviously significant. It marks the entrance to the sanctuary and likely refers to the sacraments or the bliss of paradise that they promised. The significance of the figural motifs is further enhanced by the choice and placement of the inscriptions on the floor.

Just inside the threshold appears the Ichthys inscription and a cross. In the next field is an inscription in debased Greek that suggests that prayers,

alms, fasts, and repentance with a pure heart save (us) from death.<sup>49</sup>

The Ichthys inscription and cross on the floor just inside the threshold serve to mark off the church interior as sacred space and to ward off evil spirits.<sup>50</sup> Crosses are occasionally depicted in floor mosaics, and small crosslets are extremely common, although they may be merely decorative motifs.<sup>51</sup> The Ichthys sign is less common on floors; the most prominent example guards the entrance to the sanctuary in the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem.<sup>52</sup>

The threshold mosaic, the inscription in the center of the floor, and the figural motif in front of the entrance of the presbytery mark off the central axis of the nave. While they cannot be interpreted as a "solea" in a strict sense,<sup>53</sup> they are, I believe, meant to be understood together as a sequence of meaningful Christian messages.

As fewer and fewer figural scenes appeared on floors in the late fourth century, those that were chosen were carefully considered. The vessel with vines was popular because it was innocuous and banal enough not to be compromised by being stepped upon but could be interpreted symbolically when placed in a meaningful spot.

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<sup>46</sup>This severely damaged mosaic was found beneath a 6th-century opus sectile floor in the nave of the church. An adjoining field contains the well-known composition of two deer and a fountain accompanied by an inscription with the opening words of Psalm 42. V. Karageorghis, "Chronique des fouilles à Chypre en 1976," *BCH* 101 (1977), 777–79, fig. 114. The surrounding geometric ornament visible in the published photograph contains motifs typical of the 4th century.

For the symbolism of the vine in Early Christian literature, J. Daniélou, *Primitive Christian Symbols* (London, 1964), 35 ff.

<sup>47</sup>E. Kitzinger, "The Threshold of the Holy Shrine: Observations on Floor Mosaics at Antioch and Bethlehem," *Kyriakon: Festschrift Johannes Quasten*, ed. P. Granfield and J. Jungmann, II (Münster i. W., 1970), 644.

<sup>48</sup>Merlin and Poinssot, 138 ff. A survey of the placement of this motif on Early Christian floor mosaics is beyond the scope of this note. It frequently decorates the apses and entrances of Christian churches. At Demetrias it is placed in front of the north entrance to the narthex, and at Dion it is in front of the entrance into the nave. Notes 43 and 44 above.

<sup>49</sup>The inscription has ὁὔετε for ὁὔεται, according to Prof. Owen Cramer who kindly discussed it with me.

<sup>50</sup>Kitzinger, "Threshold of the Holy Shrine," 639 ff.

<sup>51</sup>*Ibid.*, 641 note 12; H. Brandenburg, "Christussymbole in frühchristlichen Bodenmosaiken," *RM* 64 (1969), 75 ff.

<sup>52</sup>Kitzinger, "Threshold of the Holy Shrine," 641 ff, with earlier bibliography, fig. 4; F. J. Dölger, "Die IXΘΥΣ-Formel in dem neuentdeckten Fussboden-Mosaik der konstantinischen Basilika von Bethlehem," *Antike und Christentum* 5 (Münster i. W., 1936), 81 ff, pl. 3. For a discussion of other examples of the acrostic, F. J. Dölger, *IXΘΥΣ* (Münster i. W., 1910–43), passim.

<sup>53</sup>They are, however, not so obviously connected with one another as the quotation from Psalms divided into two separate panels along the "solea" on the floor of a church at Pisidian Antioch. E. Kitzinger, "A Fourth Century Mosaic Floor in Pisidian Antioch," *Mélanges Mansel* (Ankara, 1974), 392 ff.